

# A JOURNEYS

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY / SUMMER 2023

— RELATIONSHIPS EDITION —



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*This view of the Susquehanna River near Duncannon, Pennsylvania, highlights the relationship between the components of a vista: light, sky, water, and land. The photo by Jeff "Mad Dog" Pyper was submitted as part of the state-by-state photo contest that continues with the ATC's online communities. Learn more at [appalachiantrail.org](http://appalachiantrail.org).*

#### ON THE COVER

*A hiker traverses Knife Edge on Katahdin. Although not officially part of the Appalachian Trail, this iconic ridge is one of many components of the A.T. landscape that make it both memorable and scenic. Learn more about the ATC's work to document scenic vistas visible from the Trail on page 20. Photo by Jeffrey Monkman*



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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

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# CREATE YOUR LEGACY

MOOSEHEAD LAKE, NEAR THE A.T. CORRIDOR IN MAINE  
PHOTO BY A.T. BOUNDARY VOLUNTEER BOB HUFF

**Planned Giving is an easy and flexible way** to meet your philanthropic goals while protecting the Trail you love. Whatever your stage in life, your financial circumstances and your charitable goals, let us show you how to make a gift that benefits you and your loved ones as well as the Appalachian Trail.

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A RELATIONSHIP WITH  
NATURE CAN LEAD TO CLOSER  
AND MORE REWARDING  
RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE  
FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD.

## RELATIONSHIPS

WHEN YOU ARE ON THE APPALACHIAN Trail and you pass a hiker going in the other direction, you always have some kind of interaction. It is often a quick nod, or a short “How are you today?” Sometimes the interaction can go deeper.

Standing on an overlook taking in the views, you might find yourself in full conversation with the stranger next to you. “Is this your first time here? How far are you hiking? Is there a big climb ahead for me?” The rules that keep us from speaking to folks we pass on city sidewalks, stand with on subway platforms, and share space with on elevators do not hold for us when we are on the A.T. As much as the Trail brings opportunity for solitude in nature, it also allows us the space to build relationships, however fleeting, with other humans that we otherwise would never know.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy has supporters in all 50 states and more than 46 countries around the world. From North and South America and most E.U. countries, to China, Israel, South Africa, Palestine, Australia and beyond, people come to the ATC because of their love of the Appalachian Trail. Wherever in the world you find yourself today, you are part of a vast community that shares a common bond.

Recently, ATC staff hosted members of the Shinetsu Trail Club from Japan, sharing information and best practices about trail management and protection (see “From America to Japan” on page 30). This summer we also had a visit from staff members of the Bruce Trail Conservancy, which is one of Ontario’s largest land trusts and the steward of Canada’s longest marked footpath. The purpose of the visit was to learn how the A.T. has survived and thrived for these past 100 years — as well as to discuss how our organizations can work together to address the global urgency around land conservation, forest health, and the increasing need for a natural place for people to go to heal and thrive.

As we move further out of the Covid-19 crisis, we are now facing a public health crisis in this country related to loneliness, isolation, and lack of social connection. Eleven-and-a-half percent of youth and

half (50 percent) of adults ages 18-24 reported anxiety and depression symptoms in 2023. The U.S. Surgeon General recently reported that lacking human connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And while overall solutions will require a multidisciplinary and broad collective approach, we need to consider the role the Appalachian Trail — this singular place — can play in helping to alleviate some of these concerns (see “All in the Tramily” on page 42).

The Trail is within a day’s drive to close to 40 percent of the American population. The A.T. is a place where someone can walk for an hour, or a day, or weeks on end. When people take a walk on the Trail, they are strengthening their leg and core muscles, increasing cardiovascular health, and lowering their stress and anxiety. In addition, they can spend time with themselves and others that is not in front of a screen, which has proven to increase feelings of loneliness and depression. In short, the experience one gets from walking on the A.T. can heal them both physically and emotionally.

I am going to guess that you are reading this because you already know that hiking the Appalachian Trail can do all these things and more for our well-being. But there are, most likely, people you know who may not yet have had the opportunity to have this experience.

My challenge to you is to seek out someone within your life that you feel could benefit from an hour’s time on the Trail. Invite them for a walk. Bring them to your favorite view. Share with them the value the Trail holds in your life. Demonstrate how a relationship with nature can lead to closer and more rewarding relationships with people from all over the world. Show them that the Appalachian Trail is a place that makes us all better humans — to ourselves and each other.

*Sandra Marra / President & CEO*



*Left: Representatives of the Shinetsu Trail Club in Japan visited the A.T. in May 2023 to share information and best practices about trail management and protection. Photo by Kemper Mills Fant*

★  
**TRAILHEAD**  
 HIGHLIGHTS / EVENTS



**WELCOMING FIVE NEW TOWNS TO THE  
 A.T. COMMUNITY™ PROGRAM**

IN JUNE 2023, FIVE TOWNS IN THREE STATES — Virginia, Maryland, and Massachusetts — became officially part of the A.T. Community™ Program. This brings the total number of participating communities to 56 in 13 states. The new communities are Bluemont and Hillsboro, Virginia; Boonsboro and Brunswick, Maryland; and Lee, Massachusetts.

The A.T. Community™ Program was established in 2009 to assist rural communities along the Appalachian Trail with sustainable economic development through tourism and outdoor recreation. To be eligible for the program, communities commit to environmental stewardship through volunteerism, community-led conservation, and support for outdoor recreation economies. Located near the Trail, the communities serve as gateways — they are often the first stop for Trail visitors on their way to a hike, birding adventure, or family outing.

After becoming an official A.T. Community, towns along the Trail typically benefit from increased tourism, economic growth, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. “Successful communities see their events and volunteer opportunities expand,” said Katie Allen, director of landscape conservation at the ATC. “Increased community commitment to environmental stewardship helps protect the unique sense of place that community residents enjoy as great places to live, work, and play.”

Towns seeking to join the A.T. Community™ Program undertake a multi-step process that includes establishing an advisory committee of community representatives and submitting an application and letters of support. The materials are reviewed by representatives of the ATC and local partners — including Trail maintaining clubs and land managers — to ensure the community’s level of commitment and readiness to promote and protect the Appalachian Trail.

To learn more about the A.T. Community™ Program, visit [appalachiantrail.org/atcommunities](http://appalachiantrail.org/atcommunities).



*Above: Boonsboro, Maryland, became the first town in Maryland to join the A.T. Community™ Program at a designation ceremony held on June 3, 2023. Photo courtesy of Boonsboro EDC. Left: The interaction between a pollinator like the pipevine swallowtail and the flower from which it extracts nectar is just one of millions of life-sustaining relationships along the Appalachian Trail. Photo by Cynthia Viola / [www.cynthiaviola.com](http://www.cynthiaviola.com)*

Events

## SAVE THE DATE FOR THE ATC ANNUAL MEETING

VIRTUAL

THE ATC'S ANNUAL membership meeting will be held at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, August 26. The meeting will be live-streamed again this year at (see URL below). All members are invited to participate.

The annual meeting is an opportunity to come together as a community to discuss the future of the ATC and recommit to educating and empowering current and future caretakers of the Appalachian Trail (A.T.).

The results of the 2023 Board of Directors election will be announced at the meeting. The slate of candidates will be published on the ATC website in late July, and all members whose membership is current as of August 1, 2023, are eligible to vote. Members will receive an email to cast their ballot online.

For more information, visit [appalachiantrail.org/2023meeting](https://appalachiantrail.org/2023meeting).



Participants at the 2022 Emerging Leaders Summit, which took place in August at the Moichan Outdoor Center in New Jersey. Photo by Jennifer Edmond

## APPLY TODAY FOR EMERGING LEADERS SUMMIT

IN-PERSON

ON OCTOBER 6-8, 2023, THE ATC WILL host the Emerging Leaders Summit at Mohican Outdoor Center in Blairstown, New Jersey. The objective of this annual program is to provide opportunities for participants ages 18-30 to cultivate connections, build community, and learn trail skills.

Participants attend for a variety of reasons, but many relate to a desire to establish community. One participant in the 2022 summit looked to “connect with like-minded folks who share the same intentions of building an inclusive community... inviting people of all different backgrounds to get involved in the outdoors and conservation efforts.” Another aimed to “share [their] passion for accessibility and sustainability of the outdoors.” For most, the summit marked the first time they had set foot on the Appalachian Trail.

There is no cost to attend the summit; travel scholarships are based on need. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis. Reviews and vetting began in early July.

For more information and to apply, visit [appalachiantrail.org/emerging-leaders](https://appalachiantrail.org/emerging-leaders).

## Q&A WITH DANIEL BRIGGS, YALE ENVIRONMENTAL FELLOW AND MARINE CORPS VETERAN



THE ENVIRONMENTAL FELLOWS Program at the Yale School of the Environment is a 12-week summer fellowship opportunity that seeks to diversify the environmental field by cultivating the career aspirations of master's and doctoral students from historically underrepresented groups. Fellows are placed nationwide at nonprofits, social justice organizations, philanthropic organizations, environmental media outlets, and others. This is the ATC's first year as a host site.

**A.T. Journeys: Why did you decide to pursue a career in the environmental field?**

**Briggs:** For me there is nothing more important than working to ensure that our environment endures for generations to come. I entered the Marine Corps after completing my undergraduate degree at Purdue University Northwest. I have always felt that I should be using my time to help make sure the world remains hospitable to life as far into the future as possible. In a day and age when our knowledge and understanding of threats to the environment are at an all-time high, I think we have an opportunity and an obligation to make wiser choices towards the preservation of Earth and all the species that call it home.

**ATJ: What kind of environmental education did you have prior to graduate school?**

**Briggs:** I started learning about animals in first or second grade after noticing and catching toads in my backyard in Gary, Indiana. From that

early experience interacting with wild animals, I dove deeply into animal documentaries and books and the library. I enjoyed watching Steve Irwin and Jeff Corwin, to name a couple of individuals who come to mind. As I digested whatever facts I could about animals in different parts of the world, I also gained an understanding of factors that threaten their survival — things like habitat loss, deforestation, urban development, and other phenomena.

**ATJ: What are you focused on during your internship with the ATC?**

**Briggs:** I am helping create new and diverse connections between the ATC, businesses, organizations, and visitors. I am currently reaching out to establishments that fall in the outdoors realm to see what kind of educational opportunities we can collaborate on to encourage better visitor stewardship of the Trail. In addition, I am hosting a camping trip at Harpers Ferry to expose some of my fellow African American friends to the outdoors.

**ATJ: Why do you think it's important for people to have access to outdoor spaces like the Appalachian Trail?**

**Briggs:** Outdoor experiences shape our perception of the environment in which we live as well as our values. People need to value Earth's natural ecosystems to the point of making conscious decisions to protect them. We as individuals tend to ignore or waste what we don't appreciate. People need access to outdoor spaces to be reminded that we are inseparably connected to the natural world that makes all life possible.

**ATJ: What do you consider the biggest challenge to the sustainability of public lands like the A.T.?**

**Briggs:** The biggest challenge is the lack of diverse exposure to these spaces. It becomes harder and harder to sustain public lands like the A.T. when people have little understanding of what they are and why they matter. Education and exposure are the keys to longevity for the A.T.

Daniel A. Briggs is pursuing his master's in wildlife biology at Colorado State University. To learn more about the Yale Environmental Fellows Program, visit [environmentalfellows.yale.edu](https://environmentalfellows.yale.edu).



Brian King in his element behind the camera, documenting the daily life of the ATC. Photo courtesy of H. Dean Clark

## FORMER ATC PUBLISHER TO BE INDUCTED INTO A.T. MUSEUM HALL OF FAME

THE A.T. MUSEUM ANNOUNCED this spring that Brian B. King, who served as publisher at the ATC for 17 years, will be inducted into its Hall of Fame at an event on September 10, 2023. Prior to serving as publisher, King was the ATC's director of public affairs. Throughout his career, he was the publisher or senior editor of 143 editions of 20 books, as well as the producer of 35 calendars and 30 catalogues each for consumer and wholesale audiences.

King joins a handful of former ATC staff to be recognized by the A.T. Museum for their exceptional and positive contributions to the Appalachian Trail or the A.T. community. Last year, Laurie Potteiger was inducted into the Hall of Fame in appreciation for her longtime service as the ATC's information services manager.

King's service to the ATC dates back to 1979, when he worked as a freelance assistant editor of the *Appalachian Trailway News* and as a volunteer on the board's public-relations committee. A Board of Directors resolution upon his retirement in June 2022 summarized his contributions: "Brian has worked tirelessly to promote the value of public lands and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail to Appalachian Trail Conservancy members, volunteers, educators, communities, hikers, staff, and partners."

The induction ceremony will begin at 1 p.m. on September 10 at Army Heritage Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The ATC's vice president of trail operations, Hawk Metheny, will serve as em-cee.

The ceremony is free but registration is required due to limited space. To register, send an email to [atmbanquet@gmail.com](mailto:atmbanquet@gmail.com)



# SUPPORT OUR VOLUNTEERS

PHOTO BY CHRIS GALLAWAY/HORIZONLINE PICTURES

**Every year, 6,000 volunteers dedicate more than 200,000 hours of sweat and hard work to preserve one of the greatest public lands projects in American history.**

Our volunteers are the glue that holds the Appalachian Trail together. But volunteerism is not cost free, and every year brings new challenges to overcome. Our volunteers depend on your donations for: gear and equipment, training and skills development, and volunteer management and recruitment.



By donating today, you'll help ensure our volunteers have everything they need to preserve the Trail for another year of adventure.

[appalachiantrail.org/give](https://appalachiantrail.org/give)



APPALACHIAN FOCUS

## WIDE PERSPECTIVE

THE RELATIONSHIP THAT WE AS HUMANS have to the landscape we traverse can be hard to appreciate fully at trail level. That is, until we confront a vista where sky, mountains, and water meet. Only then do we grasp that we are part of an interconnected whole that is much larger than our human scale.

Photo by Jerry Monkman from Moxie Bald Mountain, Maine. [ecophotography.com](http://ecophotography.com)

# DEEP CONNECTIONS

A lifelong love of the Appalachian Trail sparked by a childhood trip to the Smoky Mountains results in a strong commitment to give back as an A.T. volunteer.

■ BY ANNE SENTZ



*Left: A trip to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which gets its name from the foggy haze shown here, inspired Matt Perrenod's lifelong love of the Appalachian Trail. Photo by Ed Tobin. Left, inset: Matt Perrenod volunteers frequently with the ATC's Konnarock Trail Crew on the southern portion of the A.T. Photo courtesy of Ruth Mosholder. Above: The Russell Field Shelter on the Trail in the Smokies. Photo by Brent Farmer*

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL HAS BEEN part of Matt Perrenod's life since the late 1960s, when his father took him camping in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Matt was just 10 years old, but he remembers clearly what it was like to hike up to Russell Field Shelter, which is located right along the Trail at an elevation of 4,360 feet. As Matt stood outside the shelter — which he recalls as being enormous in his 10-year-old eyes — his father pointed up and down the Trail, explaining that one way led hikers north toward Maine and the other way took people south to Georgia.

"At that time, I didn't fully appreciate what 2,000 miles of Trail really was, but it was a big deal in my little mind," Matt said.

This first experience on the Trail and the sense of wonder that came with it was the beginning of a life full of outdoor adventure and exploration for

Matt, who fully embraced backpacking during his time as a Boy Scout.

"Although the Appalachian Trail didn't occupy as much space in my mind then, the whole idea of being out backpacking — and moving from place to place and living your life out there — was such a basic and rewarding feeling," he said.

Matt found backpacking fulfilling, and he decided he needed to deepen his relationship with the outdoors and give back to the trails he enjoyed. He began searching for volunteer opportunities and, in 1992, came across the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Trail Crew program. Twenty-five years after he first stepped on the A.T., Matt signed up to join Konnarock, the ATC's flagship volunteer crew program. Konnarock — which is still going strong to this day — works on the southern end of the Trail from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Rockfish Gap

“CREW IS MY VACATION AND RECREATION, AND IT’S BECAUSE OF THE PEOPLE. I LIKE MEETING NEW PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT GENERATIONS AND RENEWING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER FOLKS I’VE WORKED WITH BEFORE.”

— MATT PERRENOD

near Waynesboro, Virginia. The crew is a joint venture of the ATC, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and Trail Clubs, making it a testament to the collaborative nature of Trail management and maintenance.

Many people who join an ATC Trail Crew do so because they want to volunteer their time and make a difference. Yet there is an important social aspect to Trail Crews. The Konnarock season is split into five- to eight-day sessions, and each week, people of varying ages and from different walks of life live together in the backcountry. As each group tackles important projects that ensure the A.T. is sustainable into the future, they bond over their hard work.

“Crew is my vacation and recreation, and it’s because of the people,” Matt said. “I like meeting new people from different generations and renewing relationships with other folks I’ve worked with before. Crew, specifically, is a great place to build those bonds. It takes cooperative work — it’s not easy, and you help each other to get the work done. You can’t move 500-pound boulders by yourself. And then you get to hang out, cook dinner together, and appreciate each other around the campfire.”

Matt has been a regular volunteer on A.T. Trail Crews since 1992, and this year is no different: he joined Konnarock in the summer for restoration work on Albert Mountain in North Carolina. Matt is part of a crew that will complete extensive rock



Matt Perrenod (back row, third from left) with other members of the ATC’s Konnarock Trail Crew in June 2023. Photo courtesy of Rich Atwood

and log work, repairing and establishing step structures that ensure erosion does not degrade the Trail experience. It’s difficult work, but at the end of Matt’s crew season, he will be able to look back and see all that he has accomplished alongside other dedicated individuals who love and value the Trail. Matt finds deep satisfaction in the sense of com-



As a volunteer this summer with the ATC’s Konnarock Trail Crew, Matt Perrenod (left) and Alex Hudak (right) work to repair and establish stepping structures on Albert Mountain, North Carolina, that will help minimize erosion and contribute to a better visitor experience. Photo courtesy of Rich Atwood

munity that his volunteerism provides, and it keeps him returning year after year.

As a long-distance hiker who completed the A.T. via two long section hikes — the first in 1996 and the second in 2015 — Matt feels a strong connection to the Trail. The A.T. has helped him through periods of grief, indecision, and uncertainty, and it has provided him with a place to embrace self-discovery. Matt used the phrase “mobile meditation” to describe his experience on the A.T., explaining that he was able to get to know himself and his values on a much deeper level.

“The Trail gave me time to understand and process difficult things,” he said. “I was able to do it in a context that was devoid of the noise that sometimes makes it hard for us to be centered in ourselves. It’s easy to get centered on the Trail. All you have to do is let it happen.”

As a hiker and a dedicated volunteer, Matt has experienced the Trail in many ways. Over the years, he has connected with hundreds of members of the

A.T. community, including hikers, other volunteers, and people who live, work, and play within the Trail’s landscape. Matt loves that he can meet someone on the Trail and feel like he is in the company of friends — it’s a sense of community and common experience that is so valuable amid a busy, modern life.

“Benton MacKaye told us why we needed the Appalachian Trail. Urban life takes us away from some things that we need to understand: it’s about the human experience,” Matt said.

—  
As part of his commitment to the Appalachian Trail, Matt Perrenod recently made a generous donation in honor of his parents, Charles and Helen Perrenod, to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy to support volunteer stewardship. We are grateful to Matt for his commitment to the ATC through his philanthropy and his dedicated volunteerism.

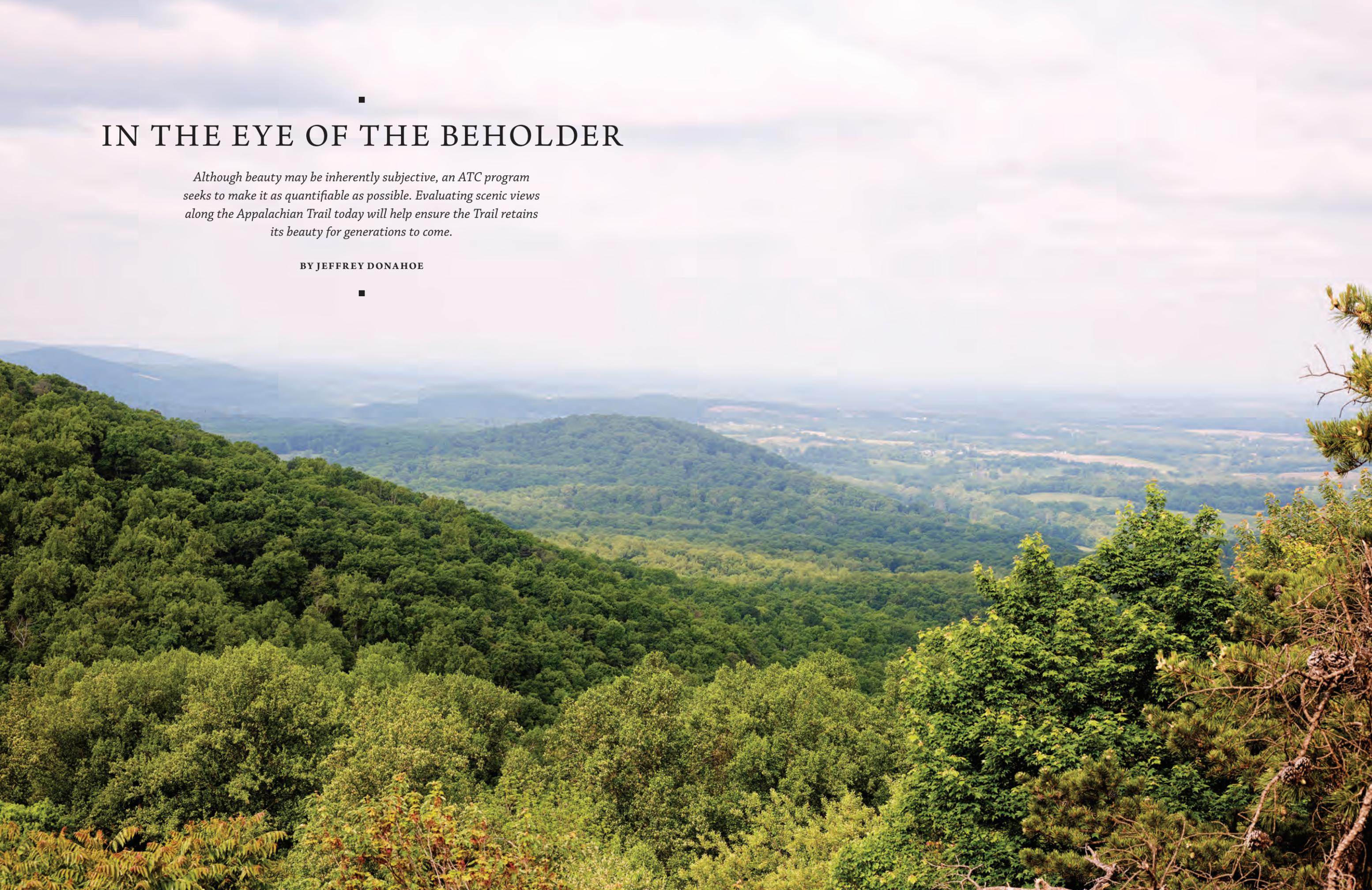
■

# IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

*Although beauty may be inherently subjective, an ATC program seeks to make it as quantifiable as possible. Evaluating scenic views along the Appalachian Trail today will help ensure the Trail retains its beauty for generations to come.*

BY JEFFREY DONAHOE

■

A panoramic view of a vast, green forested valley with rolling hills and mountains in the distance under a cloudy sky. The foreground is dominated by dense, vibrant green trees, including some pine trees on the right. The middle ground shows a wide expanse of forested hills and valleys, with some small settlements visible in the distance. The background features more distant, hazy mountain ranges under a bright, overcast sky.



PREVIOUS PAGE: A VIEW ALONG THE VIRGINIA - WEST VIRGINIA STATE LINE DOCUMENTED IN MAY 2023 AS PART OF THE VISUAL RESOURCE INVENTORY PROJECT. ABOVE: A TEAM OF FOUR TO EIGHT PEOPLE HIKES EVERY MILE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL TO IDENTIFY EACH VIEW AND ASSESS ITS VALUE. RIGHT: THE SCENIC VIEW IS PHOTOGRAPHED AS PART OF THE INVENTORY PROCESS. *Photos by Matthew Rakola*

ON A BEAUTIFUL MAY DAY, UNDER cloudless blue skies, a group of four — three ATC staff members and a volunteer with the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club — is taking in an Appalachian National Scenic Trail view in West Virginia. They are also filling out forms on clipboards, conferring with one another as they make notes about elements of the view they're contemplating.

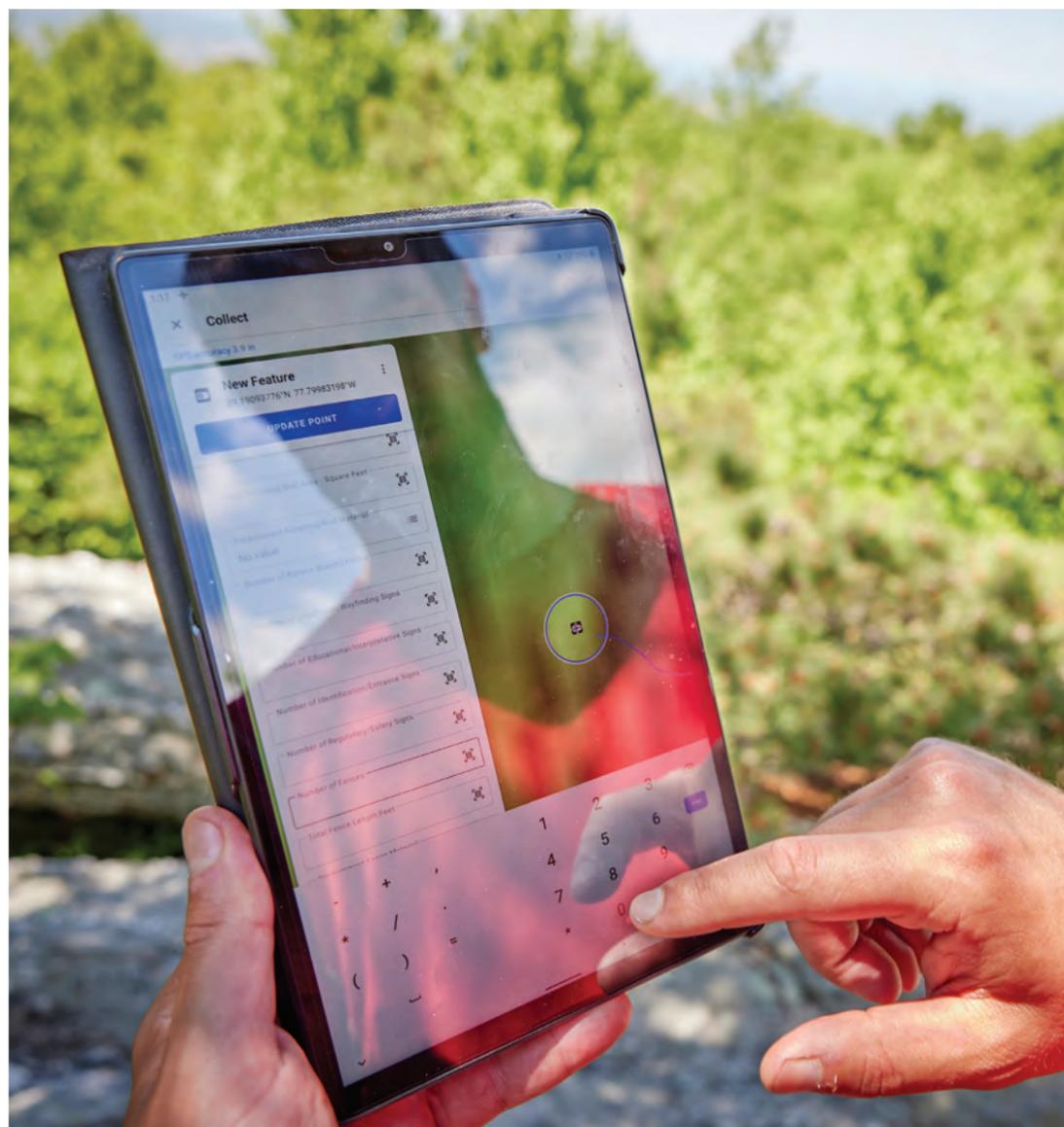
Listening in to their conversation, you might be struck by how similar it is to the discussion an art

historian or critic might have about a work of art. Team members mention focal points, color and texture, forms, lines, balance, and symmetry. They ask one another: Is the viewscape vibrant and colorful? Does the foreground overpower the view of the landscape further from the Trail? Does the viewed landscape include a wide range of the features one would expect for this region?

The crew has been spending the spring and summer tracking scenic views along the A.T. through West Virginia and Maine. It's all part of the Visual Resource Inventory (VRI), initiated after a successful



THE PROJECT APPLIES A METHODOICAL, OBJECTIVE PROCESS TO MAKE AN AESTHETIC DETERMINATION.



LEFT AND ABOVE: TEAM MEMBERS USE BOTH NEW AND OLD TECHNOLOGY TO COLLECT DATA ON EACH VIEW AND THEN ASSIGN A RATING FOR VARIOUS ELEMENTS USING A FIVE-POINT SCALE. *Photos by Matthew Rakola.* BELOW: A VIEW OF THE 165-YEAR-OLD STONE BRIDGE OVER YELLOW BREECHES CREEK IN BOILING SPRINGS, PENNSYLVANIA, IS ONE OF ROUGHLY 30 NEW VIEWS ADDED IN THAT STATE. *Photo by Pamela Roy*

2019 pilot effort. The work on the Trail itself was started in 2021 in Pennsylvania, then continued in New Jersey and Maryland last year.

As a National Scenic Trail, the A.T. is intended to connect people to spectacular natural resources and beauty. Scenery along the treadway is a fundamental Trail value, and visitors commonly enjoy the Trail through visual experiences. While each view differs in scope and composition, all of them are important to preserving the A.T. experience. And all of them face continual threats posed by

incompatible development projects and overuse or misuse of the Trail.

“Protecting views is important to visitor enjoyment, public well-being, preservation of our natural cultural heritage, and oftentimes local economies,” said Pamela Roy, VRI program manager at the ATC.

And while beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, just being around it makes us happier. According to a 2019 study that leveraged data from a smartphone app, Mappiness, individuals report





ABOVE: DATA FOR EACH VIEW IS COLLECTED AND RATED BY AT LEAST FOUR PEOPLE TO HELP MAKE THE RESULTING ASSESSMENT AS OBJECTIVE AS POSSIBLE. BELOW: TWO MEMBERS OF THE TEAM THAT INVENTORIED THE WEST VIRGINIA PORTION OF THE TRAIL IN MAY HIKE THROUGH A SPRING FOREST. *Photos by Matthew Rakola*



“WE ARE CREATING A BASELINE FOR MONITORING VISUAL CHANGES OVER TIME TO HELP US UNDERSTAND THE VISUAL IMPACT OF POTENTIAL PROJECTS AND DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE VIEWSHED.”

— PAMELA ROY

being happier when they are in more scenic locations — even when the individuals’ income level, the specific activity they’re engaged in, and the weather are taken into account<sup>1</sup>.

#### DYNAMIC LANDSCAPES

But what counts as a scenic view? You might think a view has to be captured from high up, looking down, but VRI is driven by what visitors can see from the Trail: waterfalls, interesting rock formations, streams, rivers, and ponds, as well as any built environment. If it’s outside, and something visitors pause to take in, it gets documented. The team covers every mile on foot and inventories all the views they encounter.

The VRI project aims to apply a methodical, objective process to make an aesthetic determination. The team hikes a section — covering roughly 35 miles per week — to collect documentation, identify the type of view seen (“natural,” “agricultural,” “rural,” or “suburban”), and assign a score for each view. The team considers attributes, characteristics, and features, such as landforms, bodies of water, roads, buildings — anything and everything, both

natural and manmade, moving and stationary — that is visible from the Trail. (These can be referred to as a view, viewscape, viewshed, or scenic resource.)

Team members photograph select views from each area, document the elements of the landscape (mountains, lakes, and roads) and, importantly, assess the level of impact each view has already sustained and the potential for additional impacts in the future.

“We are creating a baseline for monitoring visual changes over time to help us understand the visual impact of potential projects and developments within the viewshed,” Roy said.

The main uses of the VRI dataset are to protect the land surrounding the A.T. and to create a better visitor experience through appropriate management at viewpoints. Landscapes aren’t static: they are at risk of changing, being developed, or subject to a slow alteration over time.

“We want to understand how we can protect scenic views,” said Marian Orlosky, director of science and stewardship at the ATC. “Impacts aren’t something that you necessarily see in a single visit. But if you’re visiting a view over a decade, you might start to notice that it has changed significantly.



THIS VIEW OF GREENWOOD LAKE FROM AN OVERLOOK ON THE TRAIL JUST SOUTH OF THE NEW YORK – NEW JERSEY BORDER IS ONE OF 34 VISTAS IN NEW JERSEY DOCUMENTED DURING THE SUMMER OF 2022. IN ADDITION TO PHOTOGRAPHING AND RATING THE VIEW, THE TEAM NOTES ITS GPS COORDINATES SO THE VISTA CAN BE MARKED ON THE INTERACTIVE MAP ON THE ATC'S WEBSITE. *Photo by Pamela Roy*

That's something that we can now track through the VRI process and understand how landscapes are prone to changing in both the short term and the long term," she added.

There's nothing sentimental or preferential about the scoring, which uses a rubric developed for the VRI system that holds to observable indicators. Because the process is so intensive, and the data is collected and rated by a team of four to eight persons, the rigor of the VRI data gathering ensures that a scenic view does not receive a high score "just because it looks pretty to some people," Roy said. (VRI does not compare between landscapes.)

"It can definitely be a challenge to set aside that emotional attachment to a place or the subjectiveness that can creep in," Orlousky said. "But I am a scientist by training, so I'm used to following a

protocol, following a process. And I think it's always good to have the balance of other people working with you to keep you in check and make sure that you're staying as objective as possible."

"I really enjoy the visual resource inventory process because it allows me to stop and think about why I love views or what makes a great view and what is important to me," Orlousky added.

#### CONSERVING FOR THE FUTURE

It's an understatement that views are extremely important to visitors to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. But right now, the ATC doesn't know where all the viewpoints are or what portions of the surrounding landscape are visible from them. For example, data gathered on the Trail in Penn-

sylvania in 2021 revealed that 37 percent of the 90 documented views were new since the last time views were documented, and 23 percent no longer exist or qualify as views.

The VRI is therefore providing a baseline data-based inventory of all views, which is critical to Trail management and conservation.

"If we want to continue to manage and conserve the Trail, the corridor lands, and beyond, we need to know what's out there," Roy said.

Scoring all of the views along the 2,198-mile Appalachian Trail is daunting to say the least, but it also creates opportunities for partnerships. To date, partners have included the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, state agencies, and the Trail maintaining clubs, among others. Other non-profit partners such as the Kittatinny Coalition, Heart of Maryland Conservation Alliance, and the Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust join in because they want the data to help fulfill their needs for management and protection.

The data collected from the VRI program will help the ATC and its partners determine the funding and other resources needed to protect the A.T.'s scenic resources so future generations will be

able to enjoy them. The photographs of both pristine and significantly impacted views will demonstrate what could happen if we are not proactive in advocating for their conservation — and will help educate the public and policymakers alike about how important (and fragile) A.T. scenic resources truly are.

And while there are many planned uses for data, the sky is the limit for how the photos and information collected could be leveraged in the future. "There's a lot of unknown potential about how we could use the data in the future," Orlousky said.

Ironically, both Roy and Orlousky have academic backgrounds in not only science but art. And like great art, "Outstanding views provide unique experiences, they build a connection between the visitor and the landscape, and they inspire," Orlousky said.

#### Endnote:

Seresinhe, C.I., Preis, T., MacKerron, G. et al. "Happiness is Greater in More Scenic Locations." *Scientific Reports* 9, 4498 (2019). Accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-40854-6>



## FROM AMERICA TO JAPAN: HOW THE A.T. INSPIRED THE SHINETSU TRAIL



*Despite being separated by 10,000 miles and the world's largest ocean, the Appalachian Trail and the Shinetsu Trail in Japan are inextricably connected. From their origins and purpose to the ways in which they are currently managed, the two trails have a surprising amount in common.*

■ BY ANNE MERRILL



“WHEN WE TRY TO PICK OUT  
ANYTHING BY ITSELF, WE FIND IT  
HITCHED TO EVERYTHING  
ELSE IN THE UNIVERSE.”

— JOHN MUIR, MY FIRST SUMMER IN THE SIERRA, 1911

BENTON MACKAYE’S IDEA FOR THE Appalachian Trail has its origins in a specific point in time and space. The early 20th century in the United States was a period of rapid urbanization as the country emerged from the Industrial Revolution and its first international war and pandemic. The conservation movement, championed since the late 1800s by John Muir among others, was resulting in the first national park to be created on the East Coast — Acadia National Park, in Maine, established in 1919.

Nationwide, and especially in the crowded cities of the Northeast, people were waking up to the restorative benefits of time in nature. MacKaye described these as opportunities for both recreation and recuperation — activities that could engender a new perspective on the drudgery of daily life.

Despite the specific context that inspired the A.T.’s creation, there is no containing a good idea. Throughout its history, the Trail has inspired the development of numerous long trails in the United States and worldwide. In addition, the experiences that individuals have on the A.T. — and the opportunity for reflection that Trail time affords — have given rise to countless big dreams and ideas.

Just as everything in nature is interconnected,

as John Muir eloquently stated, so too with trails. And therefore the origin, purpose, and maintenance of a long-distance trail 10,000 miles and an ocean away from the Appalachian Trail cannot be extricated from the A.T. and its impact.

#### FROM JOHN MUIR TO NORIYOSHI KATŌ

In addition to inspiring “America’s best idea,” our system of national parks, John Muir’s vision for protecting the beauty of nature has been embraced and upheld by people worldwide for over a century. One of the countless individuals who found inspiration in his words was a writer and journalist in Japan named Noriyoshi Katō.

Katō lived in the Yatsugatake Mountains, which are renowned in Japan as a hiking and trekking destination. Inspired by the beauty and peace of life in the mountains, he became passionate about environmental conservation and the preservation of wilderness places. Katō came across Muir’s writings and wanted to bring attention to them in Japan, which had a system of under-utilized national parks. His book *Forest Saint, Father of Conservation: John Muir* was published in 1985.

Following his passion and his budding curiosity

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A PORTION OF THE SHINETSU TRAIL THROUGH A BEECH TREE FOREST. Photo by Sarah Adams. LEFT: THE SHINETSU TRAIL (TOP) AND THE A.T. BOTH PASS THROUGH A VARIETY OF LANDSCAPES, FROM WETLANDS TO LEAFY FORESTS TO ALPINE RIDGES. Top photo by Sarah Adams; bottom photo by Jonathan Ely



ABOVE, COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: THREATS TO BEECH TREES IN JAPAN FROM LOGGING LED TO THE EMERGENCE OF THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT THERE. NORIYOSHI KATŌ, WHO THRU-HIKED THE A.T. IN 2005, ADVOCATED FOR THE CREATION OF LONG TRAILS IN JAPAN. *Photos by the Shinetsu Trail Club. A TRAIL MARKER ON THE SHINETSU TRAIL. Photo by Sarah Adams*

in long trails, Katō hiked the John Muir Trail in 1995 and then the Appalachian Trail 10 years later. He wrote books about both experiences, which have since become hiking bibles, of sorts, in Japan. Katō became convinced that spending long periods of time in nature — enabled by long-distance hiking trails — is key to inspiring people to care about the environment and want to protect it.

Reflecting on his A.T. experience, Katō said at the time, “It’s not just about nature, but is a walk that connects nature, culture, and history.... The longer you’re on it, the more you can experience the diversity of history and culture. You’ll have deep, warm,

heart-to-heart communications with people.”

Katō’s tireless advocacy in Japan for the concept of long trails eventually brought him into contact with a nascent project in Iiyama, in the Nagano prefecture. There, a forward-looking mayor was leading an effort to create a trail through the region’s beautiful and life-sustaining beech tree forests. The goal was to promote recreation-based tourism and environmental protection in a predominantly rural region.

In 2008, the first approximately 50 miles of this trail, which became known as the Shinetsu Trail, officially opened. The remaining 40-mile segment

“IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT NATURE, BUT IS A WALK THAT CONNECTS NATURE, CULTURE, AND HISTORY.... THE LONGER YOU’RE ON IT, THE MORE YOU CAN EXPERIENCE THE DIVERSITY OF HISTORY AND CULTURE.”

– NORIYOSHI KATŌ



LIKE THE A.T., THE SHINETSU TRAIL PASSES THROUGH SMALL VILLAGES THAT BENEFIT FROM THE BOOST THAT RECREATION-BASED TOURISM PROVIDES. *Photo by the Shinetsu Trail Club*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: HIROSHI KIMURA AND YUKIKO SATOH FROM THE SHINETSU TRAIL CLUB VISITED THE MCAFEE KNOB PORTION OF THE A.T. IN MAY 2023 AND ADMIRERD THE ROCK FORMATIONS ALONG THE TRAIL. A HANGTAG FOR THE SHINETSU TRAIL IS MODELED AFTER THE PRACTICE ON THE A.T. AND INCLUDES INFORMATION ON ONE SIDE ABOUT LEAVE NO TRACE PRINCIPLES. *Photos by Kemper Mills Fant*

“THE CONNECTION THAT CONTINUES TO GROW BETWEEN THE SHINETSU TRAIL AND THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL IS LIKE A LONG TRAIL IN ITSELF. THE RELATIONSHIP TIES PEOPLE AND PLACES TOGETHER IN SOMETIMES UNEXPECTED WAYS THAT SPARK NEW IDEAS AND POSSIBILITIES.”

— SARAH ADAMS

as envisioned by Katō was completed in 2022. Skirting the border between two prefectures, the trail traces the ridgeline of the Sekida Mountains for most of the way, then summits the 6,500-foot Mount Naeba. It is Japan’s first long trail created along the A.T. model — requiring an innovative public-private partnership and a network of volunteers to manage and protect it.

#### A MODEL PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The Appalachian Trail is the embodiment of a cooperative spirit that has enabled some of the best ideas in our country to come to fruition. The Trail was built almost entirely by volunteers and is maintained and protected today by the collaborative efforts of volunteer-driven Trail maintaining clubs, as well as U.S. government agencies and dozens of state and local partners. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is the nexus of this complex yet highly successful partnership — as the only nonprofit dedicated to protecting the entire A.T.

When the Shinetsu Trail was starting to become a reality in Japan, the project’s leaders arranged a visit to the Appalachian Trail in 2003 to see the public-private partnership in action. They joined Georgia A.T. Club members in a trail management project and met with representatives of the ATC, the National Park Service, and other partners. They learned about the federal protection that the Appalachian Trail has enjoyed since 1968, when Congress passed the National Trail Systems Act and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed it into law. And so the Shinetsu Trail’s champions realized that their

project would never succeed without the cooperation of the national government in Japan as well as the communities and prefectures that would soon be connected by the trail. And it would require a management organization to coordinate the efforts of all involved.

Upon their return home, the project leaders created the Shinetsu Trail Club and, in 2004, signed an agreement for cooperation on trail management with Japan’s Forestry Agency and the Kantō Forest Management Bureau. This was the first time in Japan that the national government signed an agreement with a non-profit.

Among the people from Japan who visited the A.T. in 2003 were Noriyoshi Katō, who had championed the long trail movement in his home country, and Hiroshi Kimura, who is currently a member of the Shinetsu Trail Club board of directors. Katō passed away in 2013 from ALS, leaving behind a legacy of books and trail guides full of hiking tips and wisdom about long trails. Thanks in part to Kimura’s continued involvement, and new staff members at the Shinetsu Trail Club who have thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail themselves, the relationship between the Shinetsu Trail Club and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy has remained strong.

#### A SECOND VISIT, TWO DECADES LATER

The group that gathered at the McAfee Knob trailhead parking lot in Virginia on a mid-May morning was a microcosm of the public-private partnership that the Shinetsu Trail Club has sought to replicate. There were three volunteers from the Roanoke A.T. Club, two representatives of the National Park Ser-



THE PARTICIPANTS ON THE HIKE TO MCAFEE KNOB WITH THE SHINETSU TRAIL CLUB REPRESENTATIVES CONSTITUTED A MICROCOSM OF THE COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM. *Photos by Kemper Mills Fant*

THE SHINETSU TRAIL'S CHAMPIONS REALIZED THAT THEIR PROJECT WOULD NEVER SUCCEED WITHOUT THE COOPERATION OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN JAPAN AS WELL AS THE COMMUNITIES AND PREFECTURES THAT WOULD SOON BE CONNECTED BY THE TRAIL. AND IT WOULD REQUIRE A MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION TO COORDINATE THE EFFORTS OF ALL INVOLVED.

vice, and a half-dozen or so staff from the ATC. They had gathered at one of Virginia's most visited sections to discuss trail maintenance best practices and visitor use management strategies with two representatives of the Shinetsu Trail Club — Hiroshi Kimura, who had visited in 2003, and Yukiko Satoh, who was also no stranger to the A.T., having thru-hiked it in 2018. Satoh is now a staff member of the Shinetsu Trail Club.

After setting off up the Trail at a brisk pace, the group began stopping frequently to talk about hazard trees: what qualifies as one and what actions are taken to address them. A set of switchbacks prompted a discussion of social trails and the management practices that help discourage hikers from cutting straight down a hill rather than staying on the zig-zagging treadway. A conversation about signage took place where the trail crosses the fire road just over a mile from the McAfee Knob overlook. Demonstrating their knowledge about the A.T.'s cooperative management system, Satoh and Kimura asked: Who decides a sign is needed in a particular location? Who is responsible for making the sign? Who pays for it?

Up at the knob, the shop talk gave way to admiring the sweeping views of Catawba Valley, taking photos, and eating lunch together. Satoh recalled being awed by the views five years ago, during their 2018 thru-hike. Kimura requested a photo of himself striking the same pose that Noriyoshi Katō had struck for the cover photo of his 2011 book about his A.T. thru-hike.

The McAfee Knob hike was the high-water mark of the Shinetsu Trail Club representatives' visit to the A.T. in 2023. They had begun their trip in Georgia, where they were hosted by the Georgia A.T. Club and did some trail maintenance work with the ATC Konnarock Trail Crew near Preachers Rock. Kimura and Satoh then made their way north to Asheville, where they met with Carolina Mountain Club members and staff from the ATC's Southern Regional Office. The following day, they traveled to Roan Mountain to attend a field visit with staff from ATC Science & Stewardship, Cherokee National Forest, and Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy. After a brief stop in Blacksburg, they hiked McAfee Knob before parting ways — Kimura to head back to Japan, and Satoh to attend Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia, before heading home.

"The Shinetsu Trail, which is considered a leading example of long-distance trails in Japan, has only been in operation for 18 years and is still in the process of trial and error. The 100-year-old A.T. is a great senior to us, and we need to continue to gain much insight from the ATC," said Satoh.

#### A FAMILY CONNECTION

Trails bring people together and create connections that can be multinational, multigenerational, as well as multilayered. Another layer in the relationship between the Shinetsu Trail Club and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy is a family



ENJOYING THE SUMMIT AT MCAFEE KNOB, FROM LEFT: ATC RIDGERUNNER SUZANNE NEAL, HIROSHI KIMURA, YUKIKO SATOH, DIANA CHRISTOPULOS OF THE ROANOKE A.T. CLUB, AND LAURA BELLEVILLE OF THE ATC. *Photo by Kemper Mills Fant*

## COULD MACKAYE HAVE IMAGINED THAT HIS VISION FOR A LONG-DISTANCE TRAIL THROUGH THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS WOULD INSPIRE A TRAIL THROUGH MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD?

connection that an ATC staff member, Sarah Adams, has with the trail in Japan

Adams is the ATC's regional manager for Georgia and the Nantahala area. She grew up in north Georgia not far from the A.T.'s southern terminus at Springer Mountain. In 2002, Noriyoshi Katō stayed with Adams' parents while in the U.S. for a Japanese documentary film about the Appalachian Trail. Adams' mother, Sayuri, is originally from Japan. Adams' father, Joe, coordinated the 2003 visit by Shinetsu Trail Club representatives. When Katō returned to thru-hike the A.T. in 2005, Adams' parents served as his first "Trail angels," sending him food and gear in post office packages as he made his way north.

Adams was a young child then, but her family's connection to Katō made an impact. As she later wrote in her senior thesis for Yale University, from which she graduated in 2020, "I was curious about how and why someone like Katō would travel all the way from Japan, where my mother is from, to hike the [Appalachian] trail. My childhood memories of Katō made me want to know more about his influence in Japan and the development of long trails there."

Prior to graduating from Yale, Adams hiked the Shinetsu Trail. She also wrote a thesis, titled "*Jappalachia: Connections between the Appalachian Trail and Japan's Shinetsu Trail*," that explores how the two trails exemplify the unique characteristics of their respective locations as well as what she calls the "power of transnational connections." The thesis was later developed into an online exhibit by the Yale University Library, which serves as a starting

point for many people to learn about the relationship between the two trails.

Adams joined the ATC staff as a regional manager in the summer of 2021 and is currently responsible for managing the southern-most 175 miles of the A.T., working closely with agency partners, volunteer clubs, and A.T. communities. Together with Laura Belleville, ATC's vice president of Conservation and Policy and board member of the World Trails Network, Adams coordinated the 2023 visit from the Shinetsu Trail Club representatives.

MacKaye's inspiration for the Appalachian Trail came while he stood at the summit of Stratton Mountain, the highest peak in southern Vermont. He later described the moment, in a letter to the Appalachian Trail Conference annual meeting in 1964: "It was a clear day, with a brisk breeze blowing. North and south, sharp peaks etched the horizon. I felt as if atop the world, with a sort of planetary feeling. I seemed to perceive peaks far southward, hidden by old Earth's curvature. Would a footpath some day reach them from where I was then perched? Little did I dream..."

Could MacKaye have imagined that his vision for a long-distance trail through the Appalachian Mountains would inspire a trail through mountainous terrain on the other side of the world? Perhaps. At the very least, he must have appreciated that the connections sparked by trails can often know no bounds.

# “ALL IN THE TRAMILY”

BY SPONTANEOUSLY SPARKING OR STRENGTHENING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, TRAIL TIME CAN BE A POWERFUL ANTIDOTE TO THE EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN THE UNITED STATES.

■ BY SARAH JONES DECKER

I met my three friends early Saturday morning at the grocery store parking lot. Coffee in hand, we crammed into one truck and headed for the trailhead. We were hiking one of my favorite A.T. sections in Tennessee from the top of Roan Mountain down to Highway 19E. Free of kids, husbands, and all other responsibilities, we set off following the white blazes. For the next two days, we walked along the thin dirt path through high-elevation spruce and fir forests, and along rocky outcroppings dotting open grassy fields. The weather was perfect, and we laughed and snacked our way down the Trail together — admiring the endless blue layer views that make up the magical balds of the Roan Highlands.

THE AUTHOR (FAR RIGHT) RECONNECTS EVERY YEAR WITH A TRAMILY FORMED DURING HER 2008 THRU-HIKE. SHE MET THE “CINCINNATI BOYS” WHILE IN THE SMOKY MOUNTAINS AND HIKED ON AND OFF WITH THEM THROUGH MULTIPLE STATES. HERE THEY ARE ON A BACKPACKING ADVENTURE IN 2022. *Photo courtesy of Sarah Jones Decker*





“A JOURNEY IS BEST MEASURED IN FRIENDS, RATHER THAN MILES.”

– TIM CAHILL

My little hiking group has been meeting once a month for the last three years. During the early months of the pandemic, I remember the feeling of isolation becoming more prevalent in our lives as our small rural circles began to feel even smaller. I started a Facebook hiking group to reconnect and get local friends out on the Trail. The A.T. runs over 70 miles along our county line in North Carolina, spanning two iconic locations from Max Patch to Big Bald. Being out on the Trail every month became the social and therapeutic outlet we didn't know we collectively needed so badly in our busy lives.

The health benefits of community and spending time in nature are not new discoveries. There is wellness to be found in the wilderness, and social connection can make the journey that much sweeter. Over a hundred years ago, American conservationist, forester, and planner Benton MacKaye envisioned the A.T. as a way to get people away from the pressures of their modernized world. A century later, being outdoors and connecting on the Trail continues to be important in what can seem like a more connected, yet somehow disconnected world.

**A NATIONAL CRISIS**

Humans are social beings and need to feel connected to others — whether at work, at home, or out in nature. In May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued a public health advisory

about the epidemic of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in the United States. The accompanying report states, surprisingly, that loneliness was prevalent in approximately half of U.S. adults even before Covid became the other pandemic.

Dr. Murthy's recommendations for combatting loneliness and improving public health in America include six pillars for advancing social connection: strengthening social infrastructure, enacting pro-connection public policies, mobilizing the health sector, reforming digital environments, deepening our knowledge about the importance of social connection, and cultivating a community of connection.

Loneliness and isolation can increase risks to our physical, mental, and societal health. The Surgeon General's report states that “increased connection can help reduce the risk of serious health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, dementia, and depression. Communities where residents are more connected with one another fare better on several measures of population health, community safety, community resilience when natural disasters strike, prosperity, and civic engagement.”

With a public health crisis of loneliness, finding connection on the Appalachian Trail might be just the right medicine. Dr. Murthy states that “given the significant health consequences of loneliness and isolation, we must prioritize building social connection the same way we have prioritized other critical public health issues such as tobacco, obesity,

EXPERIENCING THE TRAIL WITH OTHERS CAN MAKE EVEN THE SMALL MOMENTS — LIKE A SHARED SNACK BREAK ON SUN-WARMED ROCKS — THAT MUCH SWEETER. *Photo by Sarah Jones Decker*



UNLIKE NORMAL RELATIONSHIPS THAT  
TAKE TIME TO BUILD IN THE REAL  
WORLD, FORMING A TRAMILY CAN FEEL  
ACCELERATED FOR SOME.

and substance use disorders. Together, we can build a country that's healthier, more resilient, less lonely, and more connected."

**THE MANY FORMS OF TRAIL BONDING**

The importance of social connectivity to human health is appreciated not only by Americans. For more than a decade, author Dan Buettner, with the help of National Geographic Society, has been identifying and studying areas around the world with high concentrations of longevity and people living healthily over 100 years of age. His findings became known as "The Blue Zones," which are spread geographically around the world (with no locations currently in the United States). Buettner's research revealed nine common traits of centenarians in these zones that could contribute to their longevity: physical activity, a sense of purpose, adequate sleep, plant-based diets, moderate alcohol and food consumption, strong family ties, community encouragement, and a sense of community.

Of the three big hiking trails in America, the A.T. is undoubtedly the most social. Even if you go out on the Trail alone, you will almost surely connect with others while walking. The word "tramily" has not officially made Websters yet, but this portmanteau for "trail" and "family" is probably a term you have heard in relation to the Appalachian Trail. A tramily refers to any group that spends a significant amount of time together on a trail. The term is not limited to a close-knit group on a thru-hike. A trail

family can take on many forms of bonding with and supporting one another. Tramilies can be the group of volunteers you join for Trail maintenance every Friday, a friend group that meets up every year to do a new section along the Trail, or the partner, children, or grandchildren you bring along with you. A trail family can also be the people you meet while on the A.T. that instantly become your roving clan of kindred spirits.

**SHARED BUT DISTINCT EXPERIENCES**

I traveled with a rotating cast of characters from all over the world on my thru-hike in 2008. My mom was worried I would be alone, but I met Orion and Johnny Thunder in the first 15 miles and we hiked together for over a month. I met the three "Cincinnati Boys" early on in the Smokies and we hiked sporadically around each other for months across multiple states. We eventually summited Katahdin together, forever solidifying our tramily bond. Fifteen years later, we are still in touch and see each other almost every year.

People can get very close quickly on the Trail. But unlike normal relationships that take time to build in the real world, forming a tramily can feel accelerated for some. Traveling with a trail family doesn't mean you hike every mile together. Even if two people shared every mile hand in hand, they wouldn't walk the same trail or have the exact same experience. I thru-hiked with my friend, Scout, and despite sharing mail drops and sometimes a tent,



PREVIOUS SPREAD AND ABOVE: THE AUTHOR AND FRIENDS SHARE THE MILES TOGETHER ON A TWO-DAY HIKE THROUGH THE ROAN HIGHLANDS, ADMIRING THE ENDLESS BLUE LAYER VIEWS THAT MAKE UP THE MAGICAL BALDS. *Photos by Sarah Jones Decker*

we had two very different hikes. We often hiked alone or joined one or a few people throughout the day, but we always met up at lunch and camped together at night.

Traveling in a group doesn't come without struggles. Conflicts and compromises can and will arise when people have differing opinions of miles, schedules, and goals. Trail families can ebb and flow — or implode — on the Trail, and there are no set rules of how long you have to stay with a group. When following Leave No Trace principles, just remember that too large a group is not ideal and intensifies impact on every level.

From my experience, “embracing the suck” together on the difficult days somehow makes it more

palatable. Hiking through a sideways rainstorm on top of an exposed ridge or post holing through deep snow is somehow more tolerable when you are laughing and sharing every miserable step with someone else. Being with a trail family can also make the good times that much greater. A shared sunset. A much-needed snack break.

Connections made on the Appalachian Trail can last a lifetime. Or maybe just until the trailhead parking lot. For some hikers, sharing the experience of putting one foot in front of the other — for 2 miles or 2,000 miles — can be one of the greatest joys of time outdoors. And it might be just what the doctor ordered.



**SHARE  
YOUR  
LOVE**

A.T. STILE NEW YORK — PHOTO BY SARAH JONES DECKER

**Gift an Appalachian Trail Conservancy membership** to protect the footpath, support the work of A.T. volunteers, enhance our understanding of conservation science, provide free and critical information to ever-growing audiences, and expand our landscape protection efforts to protect the Trail's awe-inspiring vistas and vital wildlife migration corridors.



[appalachiantrail.org/giftmembership](https://appalachiantrail.org/giftmembership)



## THE TRAIL AS COMMUNITY

EIGHT HONORS STUDENTS VISIT THE A.T. IN GEORGIA AND LEARN LIFELONG LESSONS IN THE OUTDOORS

■ BY AUBREANNA MILLER

“OUR TRIP TO GEORGIA REALLY EXPANDED my perspective on what a trail is. The Appalachian Trail is not just a trail, but it’s also a community, a safe space for humans and wildlife alike,” said Allie Morton, a student at the Colorado School of Mines.

Morton visited Springer Mountain, Georgia, at the end of May 2023 with seven other college students from across the country — including me. We were participating in Partners in the Parks, an outdoor experiential learning program coordinated by the National Collegiate Honors Council. This year, honors students participated in weeklong hands-on educational programs in Mammoth Cave National Park, Missouri National Recreational River, New River Gorge National Park, Glacier National Park and the Appalachian Trail.

The A.T. has been a frequent host site for Partners

in the Parks, and several ATC staff members have led educational workshops for participants over the years.

### MEETING FOR THE FIRST TIME

Looking northbound from Georgia to Maine, the A.T. starts with the Approach Trail from Amicalola Falls to the top of Springer Mountain. At a hotel an hour away from the falls, 10 strangers met for the first time, not knowing the friendships we would forge and lifelong lessons we would learn.

The first day of the experience, aptly named “traveling day,” allowed for everyone to fly to Georgia and become acquainted. The students all came from different colleges in Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The facilitator, Christina McIntyre, works as both a



Above: The author (front row, middle) with other participants in the weeklong Partners in the Parks program on the A.T. in Georgia. The program includes opportunities for learning about how the Trail is managed and about Leave No Trace principles — as well as having fun in the outdoors. Participants camped, hiked to Len Foote Hike Inn, and summited Springer Mountain. Photos courtesy of Aubreanna Miller





Some antics at the iconic stone arch before starting off up the A.T. Approach Trail at Amicalola Falls State Park in Georgia. Photo courtesy of Aubreanna Miller

professor at Virginia Tech and advisor of the university's Outdoor Club, one of the 30 trail maintaining clubs along the A.T. Also along for the trip was Derrick Lugo, a 2012 thru-hiker and author of the 2019 book *The Unlikely Thru-hiker: An Appalachian Trail Journey*.

On the first evening, we also met up with Belinda Dapreis, a representative from Outdoor Afro, an organization that, according to its website, "celebrates and inspires Black connections and leadership in nature." Dapreis shared her knowledge of the history of Outdoor Afro, the empowerment of African Americans in outdoor spaces, how to become involved, and much more.

### SETTING OFF UP THE TRAIL TO LEAVE NO TRACE

Early the next morning, the group set off toward the falls. After walking up the 604 steps to the top of the 729-foot-high falls, we made camp at a nearby campsite. I was one of two students participating on the trip who had never hiked a day in our lives. This first day turned out to be a good preparation for the more challenging hikes to follow.

In the surprisingly cool Georgia night, the ten of

us fell soundly asleep before 10 p.m., in our individual tents or hammocks.

The squirrels of Amicalola Falls have fearless, daring spirits. That following morning, a squirrel used McIntyre's hammock as a trampoline in a gutsy attempt to steal a bit of breakfast. If it had succeeded, it could have made away with fresh fruit, oatmeal, granola bars, or — if particularly lucky — an entire carton of oatmilk.

After stuffing our packs with tents, sleeping bags, and enough food for a few days, the real hike began. The end goal for the day: the Len Foote Hike Inn. Those five miles passed in a blur, filled to the brim with laughter, learning, and lots of sweat. At the inn, we weighed our packs and got confirmation of how truly heavy they were — ranging from 24 to 36 pounds.

The Hike Inn emphasizes outdoor education and limiting all forms of waste. "People don't necessarily come here for an education in nature and conservation, but we try to make sure they leave with one," the website reads.

At the family-style dinner, staff reminded us of the prevalence of food waste, asking for us to take only what we would eat. This mantra of "zero food waste" settled deeply in the minds of two students

## WE REFLECTED ON THE IMMENSE PASSION AND KNOWLEDGE SURROUNDING THE A.T. THAT HAD BEEN SHARED WITH US BY THE EDUCATORS INVOLVED IN PARTNERS IN THE PARKS. THOSE LESSONS SPARKED UNDERSTANDINGS THAT WOULD NOT HAVE OCCURRED INSIDE A CLASSROOM.

in the group — Grant Carvender, of Pennsylvania, and Suzanne Moore, of Georgia — who missed the "your plate" part of the speech. Instead of just finishing the food on their plates, they took to finishing all the food in the dishes being passed around the table. They eventually realized their mistake but felt triumphant, especially when they earned a smiley face on the zero-food waste board in the dining hall.

A long day ended in comfy bunk beds, only to start up again with the sunrise the following morning. The group resumed our journey to the summit of Springer Mountain.

### EARNING A TRAIL NAME

A mantra followed by many on the A.T. is to "hike your own hike." Breaking into two parts, our group embodied this advice. Half pressed on ahead, finding the hike easier when maintaining pace, while the other half took what they dubbed the "scenic route." McIntyre, holding up the rear, took to identifying plants and teaching about the Trail.

At the summit, after tearing up at our accomplishment, tearing into our lunches, and signing the register, we set up camp for the night. The next day, after heading back down the mountain, we met up with volunteers from the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, who showed us how to break rock into crush, dig berms, and create new rock steps. High up in the trees, two bear cubs oversaw the operation.

"It was rewarding to speak with Trail leadership and learn about the work they all do, both paid and as volunteers, to achieve a shared goal," Carvender said. "I also saw my first wild bear."

Back at the original campsite, around a campfire, we rehashed the events of the trip up to that point between bites of s'mores. A requirement of Partners in the Parks is to create a final presentation for the last night. Our presentations included a recap of lessons learned, a sea shanty (or traditional folk song)

written about a wild shuttle driver, a poem about each participant, and an essay highlighting the importance of journalism in the creation of the A.T.

We also reflected on the immense passion and knowledge surrounding the A.T. that had been shared with us by the educators involved in Partners in the Parks. Those lessons sparked understandings that would not have occurred inside a classroom. But even more importantly, we learned from and taught each other. Those connections, stemming from the heart, will last lifetimes.

As honor students, young leaders, and lovers of all things outdoors, we hold the future of national parks, including the A.T.

"I think my favorite part was discovering the Trail community," Morton said. "The support among the community and their respect for the Trail was beyond inspiring. It changed the way I approach hiking and getting outdoors."

While hiking, especially along the A.T., hikers gain a new name, forged from letting go of the previous self and finding new expressions in the wild. These Trail names, formed from stories only those in attendance fully understand, hold special places in the hearts of their owners.

During this six-day adventure to the southernmost place of the A.T., we each received a Trail name. Grant Carvender became "Tinkles," Allie Morton became "Hiccups," Kira Cordova became "Cub," Sarah Royal became "Highlighter," Suzanne Moore became "Just Suzanne," Lee Foxworthy became "Seafoam," Sidney Thomas became "Ice Age" — and I, Aubreanna Miller, became "Nebraska."

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Aubreanna Miller is an honors student in the journalism degree program at Wayne State College in Nebraska.  
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## SETTING PRIORITIES FOR THE A.T.'S NORTHERN TERMINUS

~ BY TOM GORRILL, PRESIDENT, MAINE A.T. CLUB

“A GROUP OF US ARE HEADING OUT ON Saturday to clear a section of the A.T. — do you want to help? I’ll buy breakfast!” asked a friend. With those words, my involvement in the Maine Appalachian Trail Club (MATC) was launched over 30 years ago, along with lifelong friendships.

A retired civil engineer in my late 60s living in St. George, Maine, I now serve as president of the MATC and on various committees. As a lifelong Mainer who appreciates the value of spending time in unspoiled woodlands, I have found it rewarding to commit to maintaining and preserving the Appalachian Trail and its environment.

The mission of the Maine A.T. Club is to construct, maintain, and protect the Trail from Katahdin to Grafton Notch at Route 26. This includes the 267 miles of footpath, 60 miles of side-trails, 47 campsites, and 42,000 acres of corridor lands owned by the National Park Service and the state of Maine.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, the management and maintenance requirements for the Appalachian Trail and related facilities have evolved, and the need for volunteers to handle these challenges has grown. The

level of expertise necessary to construct and maintain the Trail infrastructure has also increased considerably. To understand how to meet emerging needs, the MATC recently completed our first-ever strategic plan to help us develop and prioritize strategies to meet these and other challenges.

The outcome of the plan was the establishment of five goals, of which the highest priority is to develop a trail center to house the trail crew and its equipment. The MATC does not have a headquarters! We rely on space in garages and trailers to store equipment. We house crew members and volunteers in tents. The Maine trail crew, which operates across the state, has relocated six times over the last 30 years.

After careful consideration, MATC decided to construct a Maine trail center in Skowhegan, centrally located to the A.T. in Somerset County (about an hour south of Monson). In addition to providing meeting and living space for the crew, the center will host educational programs to train conservation/land management professionals and volunteers. The project has the endorsement of more than 20 conservation-focused organizations and has raised



*A waterfall near Speck Pond Shelter on the Appalachian Trail in Maine. Photo by Andrew Turnowchyk*

nearly \$2 million. The ATC has supported our effort through advocating to the U.S. Congress for federal support for construction costs.

Another priority identified in our strategic plan was the recruitment of volunteers. In the words of David Field, a former MATC president, “MATC volunteers epitomize the hardworking independent spirit of Maine — without them, the A.T. in Maine would not exist.”

Annually, volunteers typically log 18,000 to 24,000 hours clearing blowdowns and brush; maintaining the footpath, campsites, signage, and shelters; monitoring the corridor boundary; and maintaining and building privies. Included in these hours is committee work necessary to oversee finances, provide governance, communicate with agency partners, and plan more extensive projects.

Like much of the population in Maine, the MATC volunteer corps is aging. The increased concentration

of the state’s population in the greater metro-Portland area also creates challenges. To continue to share our tradition of building and caring for the A.T. in Maine, we need to engage the next generation(s).

The MATC leadership is eager to tap into the new ideas and passion for the Appalachian Trail, conservation, and outdoor recreation that new recruits can provide. We recognize that we need to develop new models for engaging younger volunteers who are busy with jobs and family commitments, and we welcome input from other A.T. club leaders who have made strides in this area.

The MATC will continue its long tradition of success with the construction of the trail center and recruitment efforts to attract new volunteers — continuing our relevancy to the next generation.

More information about the Maine Trail Center project can be found at [trailchampions.matc.org](http://trailchampions.matc.org)



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*The friendships that form, or deepen, through shared experiences on the Appalachian Trail can be life-changing. Here, friends cross a footbridge in southwestern Virginia. Photo by Cynthia Viola / [www.cynthiaviola.com](http://www.cynthiaviola.com)*